

The betrayal of the Oklahoma strike and lessons for the next stage of the teachers' revolt

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The strike by tens of thousands of Oklahoma teachers, which shut down public schools across the southwestern US state for 10 school days, ended on Monday morning. Despite their courage and determination, teachers did not win their demands for significantly increased wages and the restoration of school funding, which has been cut by nearly 30 percent over the last decade.

This is not because teachers were in a weak position. On the contrary, their fight against the Republican governor and the state legislature enjoyed immense popular support. But like the nine-day strike in West Virginia, the walkout of Oklahoma teachers was betrayed by the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and their state affiliates in Oklahoma.

Last Thursday, Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) President Alicia Priest abruptly announced an end to the walkout, claiming nothing more could be obtained and that the only way for teachers to win increased funding was to elect Democrats in the November 2018 elections.

Although the vast majority of teachers were determined to continue the fight, the announcement by the OEA gave school authorities a green light to reopen schools and pressure teachers back to work. To add insult to injury, the authorities are lengthening the working day by up to an hour to make up work lost in the strike. At least one teacher has already been fired for refusing to return to work last Friday.

The order to end the strike came from the Washington, DC offices of the NEA and the AFT, which have sought to prevent the spread of teacher strikes across the US. Asked by a reporter during the West Virginia strike if she wanted to see the upheaval spread to the other 49 states, NEA President Lily Garcia (annual salary of nearly \$400,000) adamantly replied, "No."

The struggle in Oklahoma is not over. Teachers return to their classrooms conscious that none of the problems that led them to walk out—poverty-level wages, the slashing of funding for school curricula and supplies, and the social crisis facing students and their families—have been resolved.

The Oklahoma struggle, moreover, is part of a much broader upsurge of working class struggle in the US and internationally. Teachers in Kentucky, Arizona and dozens of other states and cities are organizing on social media and looking to fight. This year has seen a significant upsurge of struggles throughout Europe,

Asia, Latin America and Africa.

It is therefore critical that teachers consciously work through the lessons of this strike, so that this knowledge can inform the next struggles that will inevitably emerge.

It is first necessary to understand the political function of the trade unions. The AFT and NEA opposed the strike from the beginning. For months, teachers pushing for a walkout were informed by union officials that they would not be supported. The walkout was organized only because teachers took to Facebook pages to organize wildcat sickouts.

The unions tried to delay a statewide strike for as long as possible, first calling a walkout for April 23. When a backlash by workers forced the unions to bring the strike date forward, they worked to limit it to a single day and sabotage it. As one teacher told the WSWW, the "OEA ran out in front of our train which was gaining momentum and started acting like they were leading the train, and then said they were stopping the train."

The unions sought to limit the strike to lobbying big-business politicians, who were all the more intransigent in the knowledge that the union officials were themselves terrified of any expansion of the workers' struggle. The unions declared that teachers must "remember in November" and vote for the Democratic Party, which, under Republican Governor Mary Fallin's Democratic predecessor, Brad Henry, spearheaded huge cuts to capital gains and income taxes for the wealthy and slashed social spending, including on education.

Above all, the unions isolated the teachers and prevented any linking-up with other workers in the state or with teachers nationally. During the strike, state union officials in Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Arizona, North Carolina and elsewhere issued statements opposing the teachers' push for strikes.

In opposing strikes by teachers, and shutting down any they could not prevent as quickly as they can, the unions are fulfilling their essential role. They are not working class organizations, but corporatist instruments of management and the state. With the *Janus vs. AFSCME* case pending before the Supreme Court—which could end the unions' collection of "agency fees" in some states—the teachers unions have been particularly determined to demonstrate their function, expressed by the AFSCME lawyer before the court: "Union security is the tradeoff for no strikes."

In this, the teachers unions function no differently from the other

unions, like the United Auto Workers—which has been shown to have taken direct payments from the companies in exchange for pushing through pro-corporate contracts. They are staffed by upper-middle class executives that “earn” their lavish salaries by enforcing poverty-level wages on the workers they claim to represent.

In shutting down the strike, the unions depended on the fact that workers had not developed any alternative organizations, independent of the unions, to carry forward the struggle.

The *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* warned teachers about the unions’ effort to betray the struggle. We called on teachers to elect rank-and-file committees in every school and community, completely independent of the unions. Teachers could prevail, we insisted, only if they fought for the broadest mobilization of the working class, including coordinating with teachers in other states to prepare a general strike to defend public education.

Many teachers turned to Facebook pages to organize their struggle. But the administrators of these pages, including Larry Cagle of Oklahoma Teachers United and Alberto Morejon of Oklahoma Teachers Walkout—The Time is Now, ceded the control of the struggle to the unions and opposed the independent organization and political mobilization of teachers.

In the wake of the union’s shutting down of the strike, Morejon advocated a policy of teachers sending representatives for a day of “lobbying” at the state capitol, declaring that all that mattered was “how many teachers are inside the capitol.” That is, he parroted the line of the unions that teachers could win through futile attempts to lobby hostile legislators, Republicans and Democrats.

As for Larry Cagle of Oklahoma Teachers United (OTU), he acknowledged in a recent interview that he had been “relieved” and “elated” when the OEA offered to support the struggle, even after obstructing it so long. While criticizing the OEA for sabotaging the strike, Cagle, who has ties to the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization, in fact upholds the organizational domination of the unions over the workers.

Cagle’s promotion of the viability of the unions is inseparable from his claim that the struggle for public education “is not a political issue.” Such a position is absolutely fatal to the struggle of teachers.

In the first place, the teachers have been pitted in a direct struggle with the government, which is, after all, their employer. The catastrophe facing public education is the direct product of the policies of both major parties, at both the state and federal level, in slashing public education and other social spending over the past three decades. The right-wing policies of the Obama administration paved the way for the onslaught on public education being waged by Trump.

The claim that the struggle should not be tainted by “politics” only means that teachers should not challenge the politics of the corporate elite and the subordination of the strike to the Democratic Party. Cagle’s statements calling for “no politics” in fact mean no socialist or revolutionary politics. This found its clearest expression in the OTU’s decision to block any articles from the WSWs from being posted on its Facebook page, an effort to prevent teachers from having access to the one publication

warning about the role of the unions and the Democratic Party.

The struggle to defend and vastly improve public education comes down in the final count to the question of who should decide how society’s resources are to be allocated. Teachers often say that the government has the “wrong priorities.” But that is only a reflection of the fact that regardless of which party holds office, Democrats or Republican, political power remains in the hands of the capitalist ruling class.

Both parties defend the economic and political interests of the banks and big business. That is why they incessantly say there is no money for public education and other vital services while limitless sums can be found to bail out Wall Street, fund tax breaks for energy corporations, build new prisons and fight endless wars.

By insisting that all children, regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds, have the social right to high-quality public education, teachers are implicitly challenging the present distribution of wealth. However, if social needs are to take priority over corporate profit, then the working class must break with both corporate-controlled parties and build a politically independent movement to take power in its own hands. Only in this way can the wealth created by the collective labor of the working class be put to use for the common good.

In West Virginia and Oklahoma, teachers have striven to break free from the grip of the unions. The expanding movement of teachers must have not only the sympathy, but the active support of all sections of the working class. Rank-and-file factory committees must be organized in every factory and workplace to lay the foundation for a general strike in defense of all the rights of the working class. At the same time, the fight against inequality is inseparable from the mobilization of workers and youth against imperialist war and authoritarianism.

The development of new organizations of working class struggle must be connected to the building of a socialist political leadership that will direct the expanding struggles of the working class against the source of inequality and war—the capitalist profit system. Nothing can be achieved without a frontal assault on the wealth and prerogatives of the capitalist ruling elite. The vast sums monopolized by a tiny layer of the population must be seized, and the giant banks and corporations turned into public utilities, to serve social need, not private profit.

This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party. We call on teachers who support this perspective to join our party and take up the fight for a socialism and genuine equality.



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